

THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW

VOL. 6 APRIL 1930 No. 2

ALABAMA GOES INDUSTRIAL

By CLARENCE E. CASON

ALABAMA is not like any of the other southern states. It has, however, until the immediate present, accepted its social and economic philosophy from its sister commonwealths in Dixie. Two facts combine to make Alabama the best place to view the march of industry upon southern tradition: sectional legend is less firmly ensconced in Alabama than in Virginia or the Carolinas, and the industrial resources are more available in Alabama. One may prophesy that Alabama will be the first of the southern states to take the measure of a gentleman in terms of material possessions.

I

There are several reasons why the sectional legend is not so firmly rooted in Alabama. The state has lacked the names of both persons and places which seemed fittingly to embody the southern tradition. Though Jefferson Davis, as president of the Confederacy, was first seated at Montgomery, Alabama, the names "Jefferson" and "Davis" cer-

tainly have the untransferable ring of Virginia, and it was appropriate that Richmond should soon succeed Montgomery. Though the "Gallant" Pelham was a daring and picturesque native son, Alabama contributed no heroes like Stonewall Jackson, Nathan B. Forrest, J. E. B. Stuart, Wade Hampton, and Robert E. Lee to the Civil War; nor can the state gather its sectional feeling about even such figures as Andrew Jackson or Daniel Boone.

Though the material of typically southern writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Sidney Lanier might be applied accurately to Alabama, these two were Georgians; and the reputation of only one thoroughly native Alabama writer has spread north of the Tennessee River—that of Samuel Minturn Peck, whose "Swinging in the Grapevine Swing" reached a popular vogue some twenty years ago. Such writers as Sara Haardt, Lawrence Lee, and Clement Wood, who were born in Alabama, have not gained their fundamental impulses from the state or its people.

Emotionally powerful songs like "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," "My Old Kentucky Home," and Tennessee's "Way Down upon the S'wanee River" have no counterpart in Alabama folksong. Ludicrous imitations of the authentic folk lyric—such as "Alabama Coon" and "Down on Mobile Bay"—can do no more than give sad evidence of our times. Jazz monstrosities have done much to remove the Alabama Negro from the genuinely sentimental world suggested in "Old Black Joe." Hand in hand with the whining vaudeville lyrics have come the minstrel-man stories of Octavius Roy Cohen. National acceptance of such catch-penny balderdash certainly tends to fixate a frivolous attitude toward Alabama within the state itself, as well as an undesirable view in the minds of outsiders.

Alabama, furthermore, has lacked places suitable to embody the southern tradition. The state possesses beautiful old towns where wide streets with parkways of crepe myrtle move naturally, as it were, from house to house. It has old

porticoes, weather-beaten and unpainted for many years, with which in the spring the faintly glorious blossoms of wistaria combine in that appropriate harmony of old age—lavender and gray. And there are broad magnolia trees which fill the air on summer nights with the mellow odor of their cream-colored flowers. Box hedges still border long gravel walks stretched beneath huge water oak trees. There are wide verandahs, two-story pillars painted white, wide hallways and cavernous apartments with windows reaching to the floor, kitchens and servants' quarters along a side porch at the rear. But there are few servants in the quarters, and often not a great deal to cook in the spacious kitchens. Country homes have their japonica hedges and their fine old oak and walnut furniture. Yet, even these material things are scattered; they are not gathered together in definite places to be looked upon and revered. There is no Blue Grass section—no stronghold where material relics make pretense of representing social and spiritual values which began to depart half a century ago. Certainly there is no shrine like Monticello or The Hermitage.

And while there is less of the sectional legend to hamper the march of industrialism in Alabama, the state is far richer than its neighbors in the resources of manufacturing. An economist might divide Alabama into three main parts: the southernmost portion has valuable forests of long-leaf pine which may be utilized for lumber and also for making naval stores; the central portion, with Montgomery as the leading city, is known as the black belt, and the term is applicable both to the fertility of the soil and to the hue of the populace; the northernmost section, though the land is poor for farming, boasts of both the Birmingham area and Muscle Shoals. In the Birmingham district apparently unlimited supplies of coal, iron, and limestone—the basic materials of the steel industry—are to be found within a stone's throw of each other. One company has the remarkable daily experience of obtaining all three of these elements from mines situated

actually within the boundaries of its yards. The area in which such deposits may be found is not confined merely to the Birmingham district; Birmingham is the center of a mineral land which is rich in all directions for an average radius of fifty miles. From Birmingham one of the most active power interests in the United States has been reaching out a long arm for the control of Muscle Shoals, about ninety miles away.

II

The piercing voices of the chambers of commerce, however, require no support from me. I am concerned with the changes which the inevitable industrial development is making upon the social and economic landscape of Alabama—the first center of the Confederacy and the first state to release the ideals of the Old South.

I have said that, until the immediate present, Alabama has taken its social and economic philosophy from its sister states in Dixie. This philosophy was built upon land ownership. Social distinctions stood according to one's relationship to the land. In Alabama real estate was not apportioned out by European monarchs, as was the case in Virginia and Carolina during the middle of the seventeenth century. But that essential concept of "original" land ownership was well marked in Alabama, where the term implied, preferably, a grant from a territorial governor, or, at least, an early seizure from the Indians.

Since the Creek Indians of Alabama were an especially fierce tribe, an inherited land ownership implied lofty courage in one's forbears—and this courage, as a token of ancestral purity, stood in second place to an ancestral social position worthy of special favor from a territorial governor. Place names in Alabama bear witness to the importance of Indian struggles in the development of the state. Some of the Creek names are Tuscaloosa, Talladega, Wetumpka, Coosa, Tuscumbia, Tallapoosa, Tallaseehatchee, Chococca, Shocco, and Wedowee. A contrast of these names with those

of original white settlements in the Carolinas clearly indicates that land ownership in Alabama bears a closer relationship to Indian battles than to colonial grants from European rulers. Most of the vested land interests in Alabama have dated from the eighteenth century. No gentleman of the Carolinas would sell the land granted him by the king. That tradition, unassailable in Virginia and the Carolinas, was also strong in Alabama; but in Alabama it was alloyed slightly, as a point of honor, as a result of the high proportion of Indian seizures as compared to royal or government land grants. This important difference in view impaired the purity of the sectional legend in Alabama.

Southerners themselves have least recognized the devastation of the Civil War in its complete destruction of the landed proprietor system. For fifty years after that war, the continuous division of the great plantations was in progress. Tracts naturally went to pay debts, because livelihoods under the old system were impossible after the passing of slavery. Gradually the land in Alabama went into the possession of a new class of proprietors, who were often comparatively irresponsible. By slow degrees land began to lose its quality of being an integral part in a family tradition, and to assume the character of a business commodity. Nevertheless, the people remained land-minded, rather than industrial-minded. That fact, as I shall try to show in a moment, is responsible for the failure of Alabamians to enjoy anything beyond a real estate profit in the present industrial movement which is sweeping their state.

My early life was spent in an Alabama town settled in 1711. Though the town is in the center of the rich coal and mineral section of the state, no one there considered life or livelihood except in connection with agriculture. Since the land itself is not especially rich, cotton growing has always been precarious except when practised on the huge scale possible before the division of the old plantations.

From my earliest childhood I remember the bulk of an

old abandoned iron furnace which stood about a mile from my home. Periodically we would hear news that a new company was going to operate the furnace; but invariably we would learn a short time afterward that the company was going to shut down, and soon the night skies over the town would no longer burst into livid hue from the "runs" of the molten iron. Wire grass and weeds would again grow in the sand where the pig-iron had been molded, and we boys could slip off down there after school to smoke our surreptitious cigars in a safe place, and climb the rusted and rattling iron ladder a hundred feet to the top of the deserted retort tower. The surrounding district was dotted with many ore washing and smelting plants; but, after various unsuccessful attempts at operation, most of them were abandoned and allowed to rust and rot into uselessness. All of these deserted towers, falling into decay within the very sight of untouched coal and ore, bear convincing witness to the lack of industrial background and skill among the natives of Alabama.

Fifteen years ago in the town where I lived the important names were invariably those of families who had held their land for generations. The major motivations of life rested upon the possession of land. Banks existed mainly through farm loans; capitalists were men who lived in town and drew their money from tenants who worked small portions of country estates; farm implements were the basic stocks of the largest merchants; lawyers were mainly versed in real property. The moment that cotton as a commodity passed from the agricultural to the industrial stage, there were signs of unnaturalness and unfamiliarity on the part of the people. Three small textile mills in the town had only sporadic success; even such small industrial plants as cotton compresses appeared somewhat beyond the aptitudes and interests of the people. The mills were constantly changing ownership and management, and the compresses and cottonseed-oil plants were always on the verge of fail-

ure. Machinery and milling processes were obviously foreign to the background—both American and European—of the Alabama people.

There persisted, however, a fundamental consciousness of the integrity of land ownership, which depended largely upon the inheritance of large tracts. I distinctly remember the contemptuous attitude of the town toward outsiders who had come into the section and acquired farm areas through the process of piecing together bits acquired from foreclosures of mortgages, and from the necessary sales by original owners who were more and more feeling the need of cash.

Wealthy bankers who had gained land through foreclosures of mortgages were regarded as pawnbrokers. Merchants who had made fortunes by selling supplies to tenants at exorbitant rates of interest found that their new riches could not raise them socially above the classification of prosperous tradesmen. A cotton buyer who won half a million dollars on the New York cotton exchange could not approach the social barrier; even with the handsomest residence in the county and the wealth of Midas, he remained a cotton buyer to the town. One of the standing jokes at our school in those days dealt with this kindly man's gift of five one hundred dollar bills to his twelve-year old son one Christmas. The son of the richest banker in town we cruelly knew by no name other than "The Bank"—and we regularly punched him in the stomach and sent him home.

But such a philosophy of anti-democracy, which was made economically impossible in 1865, could not permanently exist even in the dreams of those who for so many years utterly refused to recognize reality. The old order—which placed living before livelihood—is losing its social and economic grip in many sections of the South. It is fading into the distance most obviously in Alabama, because in that state it was less firmly rooted than in some of the others.

III

The irrevocable triumph of our machine era—which found immediate response from the artisan population of the Middle West—is not appropriate to the ethnic structure of the South. But the South, forced to abandon large-scale farming, has found small-farming pursuits unsuitable and unprofitable in view of conditions of land and labor. Lacking intelligent leadership in the adjustment of its agricultural problems, the South has seen its lands waste away and its bales of cotton decrease year by year. In desperation it has taken up the cry that Industry, a heathen god, alone can save its people. Knowing nothing of manufacturing—not being industrial-minded—the South has two recourses: it may borrow capital and hire industrial skill, or it may sell its land for cash. Alabama, unfortunately, appears to have chosen to sell its land.

So far as the state of Alabama is concerned, the much-heralded industrial expansion in the South is basically, from the local point of view, a real estate boom. The origins and experiences of the Alabama people have given them a consciousness of land values, but no consciousness of industrial values. And the breaking down of the southern aristocracy, with its consequent shift in the land-owning class, has placed a modern real estate dealer in the seat of the old southern planter. The southern planter, let me repeat, was deeply ingrained with the integrity of ownership; he could no more have sold his land without dishonor than he could have sold a Negro slave without at least a tinge of disgrace. The land, he reasoned, was a gift to his family, and gentlemen do not sell their gifts for cash.

Even the most superficial investigation reveals that practically all the recent development in Alabama is financed, and, therefore, owned by outside interests. Chambers of commerce have concentrated upon bringing industry into the state. Delegations go here and there over the North

and East seeking new industries. Towns vie with each other in offering guaranteed profits to outside concerns.

Citizens of the towns put their five hundred dollar checks into local pools to guarantee milk condensaries, kraft paper concerns, tire manufacturing plants, and other outside industries against the faintest chance of loss. And the most ironical part of it all is the vast hullabaloo set up by the local newspapers when a company with an established trade name, perhaps masking smiles of incredibility with an air of benevolent condescension, announces its willingness to accept profits from the community's resources—in view of the guarantee against possible loss. Further, the chambers of commerce advertise “unlimited supplies of cheap Anglo-Saxon labor.” Such a prospect for manufacturers beset by strikes and high wages is of course so contrary to fact and reality, that it does not deserve a passing glance. Manufacturers who ingenuously accepted such glib statements from hired promoters have at once found, to their sorrow, that the South does *not* offer “unlimited supplies of cheap Anglo-Saxon labor.” Newspaper reports of the current wave of labor strikes in the South, particularly those at Gastonia and Elizabethton, have been rather embarrassing to the chambers of commerce.

Alabama does not share in the major profits of concerns with headquarters in Chicago, St. Louis, or Detroit; the major profits go back home. Alabama has no unemployment problem for which it needs new industries; nor are its workers trained to the machine. Imported workers do not always fill the coffers of the local grocery store or meat shop; chain stores usually spring up to serve not only the imported workers but also some of the old customers of the local tradesmen. Increased deposits at the local banks are hardly enough to compensate the community for its complete change in landscape, for the steady retirement of its established leaders into the background.

In my Alabama home-town New England interests are

building a \$2,000,000 cotton mill. This stroke on the part of our chamber of commerce was heralded with awe throughout the state. Naturally some of our townsmen sold a tract of land, doubtless at a good profit. Outside contractors are building the plant; their materials come from a distance. A local contractor could not obtain the business of constructing the workers' houses; and most of the workers themselves will be gathered from the outside. Our local grocery stores are in imminent danger of being supplanted by chain companies; our drug and dry goods dealers face a similar hazard. We shall have five- and ten-cent emporiums. We shall have new professional men in the town; new doctors, new lawyers, new Ford dealers, new radio men; a new and expanded country club. The owner of our golf club land expects to sell her property to a kraft paper mill. And we shall have new odors.

Real estate men come from adjacent cities to view our lots in town and our outlying possibilities for rural developments. One of them has laid out lots along a country road four miles out of town. He holds auctions, at which seventy-piece dinner sets are given away to the lucky-ticket holder. From a nearby city a company brings investors in automobiles free of charge. It is a realtors' party. I am not sure that we shall rival the Florida boomers in grandeur, but I am confident that our economics is quite as unsound as theirs.

Disloyalty to one's native state is a major sin; I shall not be guilty of it. Nor do I record a peevish attitude toward protagonists of the new era in Alabama. It is beyond my province to assume the *saeva indignatio* of John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. And yet, one must wonder whether the pride of a race is so frangible—whether the need of cash payment so great—as to justify an uncritical attitude toward our gradual surrender of the integrity of ownership of our lands and resources.